

ABU KHATTALA'S INFO OPS SUGGEST OTHER MILITIAS INVOLVED IN BENGAZI ATTACK

Spencer Ackerman argues that Ahmed Abu Khattala had an interview with the NYT (and before that Reuters) so he could laugh at Obama's manhunt for the Benghazi killers.

That's true to a point: Abu Khattala has gone out of his way to make it clear he's not cowering in fear of a drone strike.

But I'm equally intrigued by the story he's telling. In both interviews, Abu Khattala claimed:

- The film, *Innocence of Muslims*, is what sparked the attack
- He was at the attack, but not one of its ringleaders
- Guards inside the compound shot first and he came to the consulate to help limit the chaos
- He is not an al Qaeda member but he's sympathetic to its ideology and critical of America's ideology

I'm not saying I believe any of these things. I'm suggesting we might want to consider what kind of story Abu Khattala is trying to seed, even while, with the very public nature of these interviews, he makes it clear that no one in Libya has the power and/or the desire to arrest him.

Particularly given the very vague way other militias get discussed in both stories.

Start with this Reuters quote from someone close to the Libyan side of the investigation, which makes it clear other brigades, in addition to Ansar al-Shariah, were also at the mission.

“There were many people there from Ansar al-Shariah, **from other brigades** and from the general public,” the official, who refused to be named, said, **referring to the hardline Islamist militia group** which has been blamed for the attack.

“Just because someone is there doesn’t mean they were behind it.” [my emphasis]

But note that Reuters assumes the reference to “brigades,” plural, refers solely to Ansar al-Sharia.

Now consider how Abu Khalitla, in the same article, refers to “brigade” and “militia leaders,” without specifying whether they were from Ansar al-Shariah or other brigades, and “other militias,” without indicating whether they were protecting the mission or fighting to overtake it.

He said that on the night of September 11, he received a phone call telling him that an attack on the U.S. consulate was in progress and that he then went to the scene.

“I arrived at the street parallel to the consulate and **waited for other brigade leaders** to show me the way to the buildings,” he said. “I arrived at the scene just like the others did – to see what was happening.”

[snip]

He said that after he arrived at the consulate, he began to help direct traffic with **other militia leaders**.

“People were crashing into each other because of the chaos and there was sporadic shooting,” he said. [my

emphasis]

Even when he names the February 17 brigade and Supreme Security Committee, he doesn't say whether they were protecting, pretending to protecting, or attacking the mission.

Abu Khattala said he called the commanders of Benghazi's security forces – the February 17 brigade and the Supreme Security Committee – and told them to remove their cars and people from the consulate to avoid clashes.

"Soon after I made my calls, one of the guards told me that four men were detained in a building inside the compound who had been shooting at the demonstrators," he said.

"By the time I arrived at the building the men had already escaped. At that point I left the scene and didn't return."

The NYT relays his claim that two leaders of "big brigades" were outside the mission, though it does not say which ones they were.

He even pointedly named two senior leaders of those big brigades, whom he said he had seen outside the mission on the night of the attack.

Note, too, that NYT states much more strongly than Reuters that Ansar al-Shariah is behind the attack.

Now all this seems to suggest that Abu Khattala is insinuating that the Supreme Security Committee and the February 17 brigade—the latter of which had chief responsibility as Benghazi's Quick Reaction Force—were involved in the attack. Though if that's what Abu Khattala insinuated, both Reuters and NYT seem hesitant to even report that he said it, much less comment on its truth.

And unmentioned in all of this is the Rafallah al-Sehati brigade, which we know was brought in—over hesitations from Americans—to help with rapid response during the attack.

It's in that context that this discussion—from a September 11 cable that is part of State's Accountability Review Board investigation but got misreported as part of Jason Chaffetz' effort to turn this into Obama's Jimmy Carter moment—of militia loyalties seems to come in.

The cable first discusses a September 2 meeting with the Acting Principal Officer of the Supreme Security Council Fawzi Younis expressed concerns about reintegrating militia members, including the 18,000 members of his own group. And he discussed the higher political and economic aspirations of other militia leaders.

The cable then describes a September 9 meeting with Wissam bin Ahmed, Commander of the Libya Shield 1, and Muhammad al-Gharabi, Commander of Rafallah al-Sehati Brigade and Libya Shield 2 (al-Gharabi was made to step down after the attack). The militia leaders,

discussed the very fluid relationships and blurry lines they say define membership in Benghazi-based brigades under the February 17, Libya Shield, and SSC umbrellas. They themselves were members of multiple brigades, they said. They claimed to exercise "control" over Libyan Armed Forces Chief of Staff Yousef Mangoush, who "depends" on them to secure eastern Libya. In times of crisis, Mangoush has no other choice than to turn to their brigades for help, they said, as he did recently with unrest in Kufra. As part of this arrangement, Mangoush often provides the brigades direct stocks of weapons and ammunition, they said.

They described their political plan to support Awad Al Barasi for Prime Minister, which would

give their brigades control over Ministry of Defense, and criticized the US government for its support of another candidate.

The cable went on to suggest that the Libya Shield brigade had been involved in destroying Sufi shrines they had been tasked to protect.

The last thing the Benghazi mission produced before it was attacked was a cable talking about how the militia on which it was relying for its safety had blurry lines with other brigades it distrusted.

And now, the guy we're publicly blaming for the attack is sitting in a fancy hotel regaling journalists with stories that vaguely implicate other militias, up to and including those blurry lined militias we were relying on for emergency response.

There's a lot to suggest that the CIA—the folks who were supposed to be making sense of these blurry lines of loyalty between militia—has tried to delay revealing all it knew, and learned, about the attack. If it got these byzantine loyalties wrong—and as a result opened the mission to attack by those we thought were protecting us—I can understand why it would hesitate to come clean.